



# PRIVATISATION AND WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT POSITION IN SUDAN

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This paper aims to explain women's employment status in the context of privatisation. Their position is discussed in terms of women's employment before privatisation; discrimination against women in the labour market and work place; women's experience of redundancy; women's experience of job seeking; women's responses to the changing situation after privatisation; adaptive responses women have had to mitigate their worsening economic situation in Sudan.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Using a qualitative analysis, the study found that women's employment positions were harshly prejudiced by these terminations. Both groups of respondents from the bank and the factory accepted the effect of privatisation policies in a parallel manner, as the matters surfacing were connected to the roles commenced by women at the family/household level before becoming jobless. The main groups in the sample were from the Female Heads of Households (FHH)

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group, principally, women bankers. The other group was women sharing correspondingly in the household budget, while sole workers in a big family denotes an essential group.

**Findings:** The main findings were that the impact of privatisation on women's employment status appears to be mixed. It opens employment opportunities for some women in regions where there is high economic growth, but not for many in the least developed and poor economies, such as Sudan.

**Originality:** In the pursuit of increased productivity and lower labour costs, privatisation not only led to increasing rates of female unemployment, but also worsened the working conditions of female employees. The limited employment opportunities in the formal sector, either in public or private domains, led women to remain unemployed for long periods of time, forcing them to look for other work alternatives, namely the informal sector.

**Keywords:** Privatisation; women employment position; Sudan; qualitative analysis

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## INTRODUCTION

As explained by Khalfalla and Ahmed (2015; 2017), the Sudanese economy observed dissimilar eras of transformations and fluctuations inclined by political unpredictability. These periods can be concise as follows. The period between 1956 and 1978 saw the applications of an expansionary policy to renovate the regressive economy. Nevertheless, these policies caused fiscal and monetary discrepancies. Throughout 1978–1985, the country accomplished some regaining of their economic position; this was the period at the start of the participation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the Sudanese economy. In the 1990s, the condition remained worse, with a statement from the IMF that Sudan was a non-cooperative country. Subsequently, economic sanctions were imposed on Sudan by the United States of America (USA) in 1997; these were lifted on 12 October 2017 after 20 years. The sanctions caused Sudanese economy losses totalling to US\$500 billion and damaged most productive sectors in Sudan. In understanding this situation, the government of Sudan affirmed its aim to transform the Sudanese economy as the first priority to be undertaken to overcome the problems associated with the USA economic sanctions and IMF policies. Consequently, a set of procedures, including the introduction of liberalisation and privatisation, was declared in the early 1990s as part of the government's Three-Year Programme (1992–95). This was a wider programme for economic reformation, liberalisation and public enterprise reform, including privatisation.

It should be recalled, the Sudan government charted privatisation. It intended to raise government revenue and reduce government expenditure by selling state-owned enterprises, attracting more domestic and foreign investors, reducing the balance of payment deficit, and providing more employment opportunities (Elbeely, 2011).

Some Sudanese economists, e.g. Awad (1997), have debated that privatisation is not the greatest key to solving Sudanese economic problems. Others have commented on the implementation procedure and the reasons behind the practice of privatisation policies. Some of them debated that the Sudanese economy is recognised as an agricultural economy, while privatisation is more applicable to more industrialised or modernised economies to achieve its goals. This is because the agricultural sector is highly subsidised, even in the more advanced countries such as the USA and European countries. Moreover, some Sudanese economists, e.g. Suliman (2007), discussed that the purposes of privatisation in Sudan are multifarious and provocative, as the government of Sudan conveniently recycled privatisation of state-owned enterprises to obtain more economic and political power for its factions and associates.

In addition, other groups of Sudanese economists viewed privatisation as politically driven. However, at the international relationship level, authors such as Elbeely (2011) stated that the government of Sudan applied privatisation to catch adequacy in the eyes of the international community. Meanwhile, Musa (2001) discussed that the objects are simply economic ones; nonetheless, the application was actually challenging. While economists discussing the appropriateness of privatisation specified the environment of the Sudanese economy, the applicability of privatisation to economic structures, or the purposes behind it, looking for reaction for these queries has been persistently significant. Irrespective of *whether* the objectives of this programme were chiefly economic or political; the socio-economic effects of privatisation on unemployed women from public sector enterprises such as the sector under study (banking and manufacturing sectors in Sudan) should be discussed. In this respect, alterations ensuing laying-off have led to a substantial conversion in Sudanese women's economic position, at the individual, family and household levels; this is revealed in the perceptions of the respondents involved in the current study (Khalfalla and Ahmed, 2017).

Kumar and Quisumbing (2015) stated that giving consideration to gender equality remains an important development goal. Furthermore, the importance of gender equality is highlighted in its prominence in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have been commonly accepted as a framework for measuring development progress. Of the eight goals, four are directly related to gender: achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, reducing infant and child mortality, and improving maternal health. Closing gender gaps, which tend to favour males, has also been seen to contribute to women's empowerment. However, the term empowerment refers to a broad concept that is used differently by various writers, depending on the context or circumstance.

According to Khalfalla (2012), to envisage the socio-economic impacts of privatisation and its consequent policy of redundancy on women, we need first to look at women's employment status in the labour market prior to privatisation, and whether they experienced gender discriminatory practices in their workplaces. We then need

to examine the changes in women's employment patterns and positions brought by privatisation, and finally the effect of the marriage between privatisation and practices of gender inequalities on women's employment will be explained. The paper discusses the changes that have taken place in the employment status of women as a result of redundancy policy: where the government attempted to make large numbers of employees from privatised firms redundant, women were among the first to go. Patterns of women's participation in the labour market in the formal modern and the traditional informal sector are described. First, their position in the labour market before the process of privatisation is seen to explain the changes that happened in their employment status after the introduction of privatisation policies. Khalfalla (2012) explained that women's employment status in this context is discussed in terms of:

- women's employment before privatisation;
- discrimination against women in the labour market and work place;
- women's redundancy experience;
- women's experience of job seeking;
- women's responses to the changing situation after privatisation;
- adaptive responses women have had to mitigate their worsening economic situation.

## **WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT STATUS PRIOR TO PRIVATISATION**

In most developing countries, women's activities outside the household (as indicated by participation rates) are lower than those of men; however, they have risen over the past 30 years. As a result, women have formed an increasing proportion of the total labour force. In Asia, women formed around 33.9% of the labour force in 1985, in Latin America this was 24.2%, and in Africa they remained constant at around 32% (Stewart et al., 1992).

As in many developing countries, Sudan has witnessed an increase in the share of women in the labour force. According to the National Census in 1993, females accounted for 22% of the labour force; this increased to 28% in 1996 (the labour force surveys), and then went up to 31.8% according to the National Census of 2008. Women's share in the labour force in Sudan is still just less than the average of African countries (i.e., 32%).

The female labour force in Sudan is predominantly rural, comprising 32% of the labour force compared to 68% of males'. As agriculture is the most dominant sector in the Sudanese economy, which contributed 65.6% of the Gross National Product (GNP) in 1983, women's share in this sector was 84.3% of the labour force in the same year. Women's high participation does not mean that they have access to land ownership, or control over resources. Evidence showed that women account for 36% of the agriculture labour force in developing countries as whole. In Africa, however, women are

the majority of the farmers, producing 90% of the food, but they are less important in export cash production'. Women's situation in the agricultural sector in Sudan and in other African countries showed the extent to which women were discriminated against, because their participation in this sector is considered as an extension to their domestic role. Therefore women are very much affected by the implementation of privatisation as they produce goods for family subsistence rather than producing cash crops for export. Sudan is not an exception in this regard.

Lately, in the early 1990s, the share of the agricultural sector in the GNP dropped to 60.7% in 1993. This was accompanied by a decline in women's share in this sector, which reached to 79.6% in 1993, to 49% in 2008. However, it led to an increase of women in other sectors, namely manufacturing and services sectors. Consequently, women's participation in the urban labour force has risen at increasing rates in the last decades, reaching 16% compared to 84% of males' share (1993). This percentage has been absorbed in the formal sector, and includes the public sector, private sector and the informal sector.

The public sector in Sudan has attracted large numbers of female' employees, including in banks, companies and commercial enterprises (Kheir-El-Din and El-Laithy, 2008). This sector is considered a large employer of women due to the facilities provided, such as social provisions, leave (holidays), and other forms of facilities supporting women to continue work. Despite the facilities provided, women are still lagging behind because they are discriminated against in this sector; this is because they are concentrated in certain jobs and sectors compared to men. Evidence showed similar experience in Sub-Saharan Africa where the public sector represents about half of the formal sector employment in the region. Moreover, within the formal sector in Sub-Saharan Africa, there is a concentration of men (Savin-Baden, 2003).

With regard to the private sector, women's participation is low compared with the public sector, yet there has been some progress in recent years (Yousef, 2004). In this sector females represent 68% of production and unskilled labour, 8.2% of professional and technical staff. In SSA, women who are employed in the formal sector are much more likely to be in public sector employment than in the private sector. An example is Kenya, where employment data show that women comprised 18.8% of waged employees in the private sector in the 1990s (Savin-Baden, 2003).

Women's share of the labour force in the informal sector is especially large, estimated at 26.8% in Sudan, 53% in Tanzania, and around 40% in Peru (Shields, 1980, p. 23).

Apparently there is high tendency among women to enter the informal sector, because it is more accessible, and does not require education, training or skills. Savin-Baden (2003), and Isaac and Franke (2002), argued that women's participation in the formal sector is characterised by their concentration in the small-scale, undercapitalised, low productivity sectors, where men have greater occupational spread in the sector (Savin-Baden, 2003, p. 95; Isaac and Franke, 2002, pp. 37–40).

The above discussion has reflected an unfavourable situation of women in the labour market in developing countries in general, and particularly in Sudan. This has influenced the effectiveness and outcomes of SAPs and privatisation, as ‘constrains on women’s flexibility hinder the success of adjustment in each case, typically, the constrains on women’s labour allocations cited include labour market discrimination, lack of education, limited access to credit or other inputs and reproductive responsibilities’ (Savin-Baden, 2003).

The increase in women’s employment in Sudan in the last two decades is a result of several socio-economic and demographic changes in the labour market. These changes were mainly attributed to the following factors:

1. the observed progress in women’s education;
2. shortage of manpower due to male emigration, mainly to the Gulf countries;
3. high turnover of men as a result of low wages compared to the private sector; and
4. poverty conditions pushing more women into the labour market as cheap labour (Kheir-El-Din and El-Laithy, 2008).

El-Nagar (1985) argued that ‘women’s’ economic participation in urban areas can generally be attributed to the economic strife resulting from the restructuring policies implemented during the 1980s, in addition to other factors related to the increased rates of women’s education, and emigration of men.

## METHODOLOGY PROCEDURE

Following Khalfalla and Ahmed (2017), the case study emphasises a specific case, counting its contextual and respondents, through which the extra detailed features of the case itself can be identified. The study studied an extensive series of past studies related to privatisation policies during the 1990s and forwards, and its impact on jobless workers, particularly women. In this respect, diverse situations and methods of privatisation have also been discussed in the past studies undertaken in this area of research. It should be noted that the understanding of privatisation has been reconnoitred on a worldwide scale, including the returns and drawbacks associated with privatisation. It should be noted that privatisation in Sudan has been explored, as well as considering patriarchy, as the major cause against the women working in a fruitful means. In this framework, insufficient studies addressed the impact of privatisation on women’s employment and seemed to be gender sightless. However, to address the precise research questions, the study was conducted as an experimental research on jobless women from two Sudanese privatised public institutions in the Sudanese banking and manufacturing sectors.

It should be mentioned that there are a number of methods to conduct qualitative research, ranging from ethnography to observation. As these are not suitable for our study, we selected in-depth unstructured interviews with individual women as our research method, in addition to the usage of focus group discussions.



In this respect, secondary information was collected from different sources as part of the study fieldwork when visiting Sudanese related ministries, offices and university libraries. In this regard, the information collected comprised official documents, policy statements, national strategies, reports, and conference papers published by the government of Sudan related to privatisation policies implemented in Sudan. In addition, the study referred to newspapers, magazines and academic research and studies such as journals, reports and postgraduate theses undertaken in Sudan and Sudanese related studies.

### DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE

The sample for this study was created from two groups of women; these women were made redundant from the Bank of Khartoum and the Friendship Factory in Sudan.

In addition to the interviews conducted with women made redundant, discussions were held with managers of the Bank of Khartoum and the Friendship Textile Factory. These focus groups were interviewed to comprehend the points of view of those who implemented privatisation in the sectors under study. In addition, additional interviews were conducted with Bank of Khartoum staff, the head of the Public Banks' Pensioners' Union, and the head of the Benefits Fund for Displaced Employees. Lastly, interviews with trade union members were also carried out to get more information about the topic of the study and its impact on Sudanese women's employment position. The outcome of these interviews was the gathering of important information and figures that were not available in reports or papers written about the privatisation experience of the two institutions. This was also valuable information in addition to the secondary information gathered from the above mentioned secondary sources as it also sustained the analysis of the primary data. It is obvious the data generated from women' respondents made redundant from the Bank of Khartoum and the Friendship factory, that they signify two extremes of working women in the urban setting in Sudan. This includes women from the banking sector that presented a model of professional middle-income women, and the women from the manufacturing sector that reflected the model of poor working-class women.

The study found that women's personal characteristics, such as age, marital status, number of children, level of education, monthly income, and job grades are very different when the two groups of women were compared. The comparisons were in their roles in the household and extended families. As well as being an equal sharer of and head of households, they were also contributors towards the budget of their extended family.

Additionally, they also shared the changes in their employment status after privatisation; the majority of women from both the bank and the factory were unemployed. The survey found that half the factory workers and 76.6% of women in the banking sector denoted the composition of unemployed women in these two groups. They also

had parallel responses to the decision to make them redundant. A substantial majority of women from the two institutions either refused to accept the decision or protested against it; this makes up two thirds of women from the bank and the factory.

## **WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE**

Women's accounts have reflected their conditions in the work place with respect to recruitment, promotion and the entitlements provided for women employees. Occupational features of women employees from the two institutions, the bank and the factory, are slightly different. The situation of women respondents from the bank was better compared with those drawn from the cloth factory; this was because of their level of education and training, in addition to their high level of intellectual thinking. Also, a high percentage of women recruited in the bank were qualified to occupy a number of top management posts, despite discriminatory practises against them. Moreover, women were entitled to a wide range of social benefits (health insurance, social security, etc.), in addition to access to other economic resources, such as loans (e.g., for housing, cars and crisis loans). Despite all these facilities provided for women, they still faced several challenges. Some of these challenges related to work legislation and laws on employment, and government policies adopted by public sector enterprises, including the Central Bank of Sudan.

The other discriminatory practices are referred to as the personal attitude towards gender discriminatory practices, particularly from bank managers and decision makers, who were mostly men.

Meanwhile, the case of women respondents from the factory reflects their low level of education, and the limited scope for training that qualifies them as factory workers. Their level of intellectual thinking and aspiration was much narrower as well. In the daily work of the factory, there were no clear gender-based practices, as all the staff were women. However, discriminatory practices appeared clearly when privatisation was implemented. Women were exposed to exploitative practices by the new management of the factory, as the redundant women were offered work but with worsened terms of service and conditions.

## **WOMEN IN THE BANKING SECTOR**

From the responses of the women in the bank of Khartoum, it was found that the majority were concentrated in senior positions; more than half the respondents were in job grades one to three (grade one is highest rank in job grading in the Bank of Khartoum). Despite the large numbers of women employees in the bank, and the high percentage of women in management posts, there was still a gender bias against women



in the occupational structure of the bank. Recruitment is one example, whereby women were denied the chance to be recruited as the bank's general director. No woman has been promoted to this post in the Bank of Khartoum, or any of the public or private banks; neither have women been represented on the board of trustees of the bank (advisory body) since the establishment of the bank. This is confirmed by the last national population census, where it was found that men's representation in managerial posts is 519,700, compared with only 56,356 women. This reflected gender segregation (i.e., vertical forms of segmentation), showing the concentration of men in higher tiers and women in lower tiers in any occupation pyramid (Bradley et al., 1999).

As data suggest, there is no legislation denying a woman the right to be appointed as a bank's general director, or to be chosen as a member of the board of trustees, nor is there any refusal by women to occupy management posts (e.g., three women from the sample were recruited as Banks' branch managers, which means they do not mind accepting top management jobs). However, it seems that this is an undeclared policy of the Central Bank of Sudan, which issues all the regulations that control and regulate the work of all banks in Sudan.

### WOMEN IN THE FACTORY

The discussions from women respondents demonstrated that the redundant women factory workers experienced the contradictions of stereotyping and discrimination at the household level, and fierce privatisation at the labour market level. The interviews have shown that most of the redundant women factory workers joined the informal sector for various reasons. The first was poor living conditions of the women and their families. The second was the ease of entering the informal sector, as it does not demand education, qualifications, or high capital to start a small business: it is a resort for poor, illiterate and economically disadvantaged women. However, they enter this sector in small numbers compared to women in the banks, due to the social constraints mentioned. The respondents' accounts reflected that privatisation in Sudan has led to growth of the informal sector with new changing features, such as the involvement of middle class women in this sector. In contrast, women in the banking sector enter the informal sector in large numbers (eight cases), exceeding that of women factory workers. This is because they faced limited opportunities for paid jobs, i.e. they are double the number of the women factory workers, although it is an emerging pattern of employment for educated middle-class women.

It was assumed that women factory workers may tend to enter the informal sector in greater numbers compared to women bankers; however, the reverse happened. This is most likely due to their social position in the family and in society, as their mobility is restricted by the control of fathers, brothers and husbands. Moreover, the

perception of society towards informal work is that it is of low value and underestimated: the few who were self-employed were doing it secretly, or in conflict with male guardians. Therefore, women factory workers were less encouraged to enter the informal sector, because of the social constraints. However, this sector is more suitable for them than for women bankers, because it is easy to enter: there is no high level of education, no qualifications, no previous experience or initial capital needed.

The increase in the informal sector is not only limited to the case of Sudan, but can also be seen in other regions. Moghadam (1992) mentioned that the growth of the informal sector is witnessed in East European countries (e.g. Hungary), Third World, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (1999). As this sector is very vital to increase employment and income for women, the attitude of the government needs to be changed. Accordingly, policy action needs to be formulated to improve the informal sector as an important sector that could assist the government to open up more employment opportunities and to alleviate poverty in the wider sense. The policy actions include: 1) increase accessibility to finance, 2) skill development, 3) organisation of market channels, and 4) provision of protective laws to keep women safe from violations and harassment practiced by local authorities, or by male counterparts in the sector.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It could be concluded that the impact of privatisation on women's employment status appears to be mixed. It opens employment opportunities for some women in regions where there is high economic growth, but not for many in the least developed and poor economies, such as Sudan.

In the pursuit of increased productivity and lower labour costs, privatisation not only led to increasing rates of female unemployment, but also worsened working conditions for female employees. The limited employment opportunities in the formal sector, either in public or private domains, led women to remain unemployed for long periods of time, forcing them to look for other work alternatives, namely the informal sector. Despite the unfavourable work conditions in this sector, women comprise a high proportion of the labour force, as high as 26.8% of the labour force in this sector. This pattern of employment has also been termed as the 'informalisation of female labour force' by feminists such as Moghdam (2005), and Standing (1999). When privatisation came, it claimed to introduce more efficient criteria for hiring, including formal qualifications or personal interviews, making it difficult for women to compete as expensive labour.

Consequently, if privatisation continues as part of the government's overall economic policies, both the need for women to work and the constraints the labour market imposes on them will increase, while it would be neither reasonable nor realistic

to expect private enterprises to voluntarily act against their own economic interests. Therefore, the state should fulfil its duty to protect the social welfare of its individuals. In order to maintain gender equity and the welfare of families, the state needs to provide guarantees that will secure women's opportunities to work. This means:

1. designing labour policy that respects family as well as women's needs;
2. safe and cheap day-care for children of working mothers near to their workplace;
3. a post-privatisation programme to maintain women employees' issues with the new employers of the privatised enterprises;
4. social mitigating programmes pertaining to training and skills upgrading, should be directed to women as well as men.

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## BIOGRAPHY

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